



RED KITES AND GREY LAG-GEESE OVER LAKE WESTENSEE

## CHAPTER FOUR

## SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN

THE province of Schleswig-Holstein extends northwards from the Elbe Estuary to the Danish border, and, together with Jutland, forms a great peninsula separating the tideless Baltic from the North Sea. The province is divided roughly into three distinct types of country: the flat marshlands of the west, much of which has been reclaimed, the central belt of heath and moorland, and the eastern hill country, the latter providing the most attractive scenery in what is a rather



monotonous part of the world. If the rest of the province were not so flat, the eastern "hills" would hardly merit their name, for the highest is only five hundred feet. This hilly country, with fine beech and fir woods, is mainly farmland and was the only part of Germany which reminded me of southern England, for the fields are small and of strange shapes, and are surrounded by hedges and isolated clumps of big trees. The beauty of these parts is greatly enhanced by many large sandy lakes and by a series of "fjords" (*Förden*), where the Baltic Sea has penetrated the valleys, and where lovely wooded hills slope down to the white sandy and tideless shore.

local *Schloss* and was owned by the widow of Herr Pulvermann, the international horseman, who rode for Germany in the Olympic Games and who was later to die in a concentration camp for his pro-British views.

The shallow lake covers an area of about four square miles. The sandy shores are fringed with tall reeds, and in many places the wooded hills of beech, silver birch and fir slope down to the water's edge. The river Eider flows through the lake on its way to the distant North Sea, and it comes as rather a surprise to hear the deep syren notes of large ships, apparently coming from the country, but in reality from the Kiel Canal only a few miles away. From the top of the tallest hill it is sometimes possible to see the spires of Kiel itself, just showing above the rolling landscape. It was in these surroundings that a pair of Cranes are thought to have nested in 1933.

The shooting on the lake is not easy, although at times it holds many hundred duck, both surface-feeders and divers, but to do well a boat is essential, and even then the duck are almost impossible to approach. Many Tufted, Pochard, Goldeneye and Goosanders pass through in spring, but I only knew of one pair of Goosanders that remained to nest. Mallard, Shoveler, Teal and Garganey represented the nesting surface-feeders in 1950, including three pairs of the latter. A pair of Grey Lag-Geese was also interested in a small reedy island and were seen flying around on each visit in April and May; they were perfectly tame, their orange beaks and light shoulders appearing far brighter than in winter. A number of Grey Lag do nest in eastern Schleswig-Holstein, but apparently they prefer the smaller lakes for nesting-sites, leading their goslings to the larger ones soon after they have hatched, so possibly Westensee was too large for them. Great-Crested Grebes and Coots abound in summer, and in 1950 we calculated

that there were thirty-five pairs of the former. Nest-building activities have perforce to wait until early May by which time the reeds have grown sufficiently to provide any materials, for in this part of the world they completely disintegrate in winter.

I should imagine there are some fine fish in the lake, but the coarse fisherman of Westensee seems to suffer the same boredom as his opposite number elsewhere. Returning at 11.30 one morning in our little boat, we spotted a man waving an oar at us from a distant moored punt. Suddenly, without warning, he lost his balance and fell over backwards, his feet shooting up into the air. Fortunately he appeared to fall into the punt which seemed low in the water and very heavy. He was up in a flash, only to repeat the whole performance, including the final fling! Thinking he was sinking, we sped across to "rescue" one completely inebriated fisherman, prone in the bottom of the punt, and our friend, who was in fine form. They had no fewer than six fishing lines out, all hopelessly tangled with each other and almost as many empty bottles of Schnapps, but no fish! Navy to the rescue, we towed them home to the village.

The woods beside the lake are full of Roe Deer, and as a special attraction in July, the undergrowth in the great beech woods consists largely of wild raspberries. The Schleswig-Holstein beeches are famed for their great height and straight trunks, and are among the most impressive woods I saw in Germany. One of these covers a large hill on the northern shore of the lake and is the home of a magnificent pair of Red Kites. We first saw them in July, 1949, when the leaf was too thick to find their nest. I found it next April, fifty feet up in a beech, close to the trunk, while the two Kites sailed and circled over the tops of the trees. At times they looked like huge sea-gulls, with long forked tails. Occasionally they would fly low over the lake, so that

we could look down on them and see their beautiful chestnut markings and their light, almost white, heads and shoulders, contrasting against the blue waters of the lake.

There are not many pairs of Red Kites in north-west Germany, and the bird-watchers among our naval sportsmen only succeeded in finding one other pair, which William Loftie found near Lübbekke. I saw one—a very tame bird—scavenging a village street in the Eastern Zone on the way to Berlin, exactly as others must have done in England in the Middle Ages—



COCK GOLDEN ORIOLES CHASING ONE ANOTHER

not that the presence of the Kite was the only resemblance of that village to the Middle Ages by a long way!

A solitary pair of Herons was nesting in this same beech wood by the lake, and nearby there were three pairs of Common Buzzards, a pair of Marsh Harriers and almost certainly a pair of Goshawks. Golden Orioles were there too, working restlessly through the tops of the trees from where their rich whistle "teeou . . . pleou", and a quiet, high-pitched and scratchy little song gave their positions away. For such colourful birds, they were most difficult to see and the brilliant black and yellow plumage of the cock Oriole, except at close range, was disappointing.

There are Crested Tits in all the fir-woods around Westensee, and all over Schleswig-Holstein. Considering that all these woods have been planted in the last hundred years, the Crested Tit in these parts must be an adaptable species. Although they prefer old trees to nest in, if there are none they will even nest on fence-posts. How strange, therefore, that the Crested Tit in Scotland should remain so restricted, and I cannot see why it should not spread all over Scotland and England. There are only a few minor plumage differences between the Scottish and German birds, but many of the Schleswig-Holstein birds are migratory, which may account for the ease with which they populate the new fir plantations.

Another interesting bird to be seen around Westensee is the hybrid Carrion and Hooded Crow. The narrow zone of hybridization is found in Scotland and again across the North Sea in Schleswig-Holstein, where it runs south-eastwards to cross Germany. The fertile offspring represent every intermediate phase and they are most interesting to see. I chased a family at Westensee, as I was keen to study them anatomically, but they were as cunning as ever, and I only managed to shoot one of the adults—a normal Carrion Crow! Although the zone is narrow, these two forms of crow—whether they be true species or only races—are sometimes paired off in their winter quarters, for during the spring migration at Cuxhaven I saw 3 pairs, each of a Carrion and a Hoodie Crow, migrating back together.

There is a prominent outcrop of rock near Bad Segeberg which rises two hundred feet above the surrounding countryside and it contains the only caves anywhere in north-west Germany. Apparently these caves have been formed by water seeping in and dissolving the gypsum walls. It is one of the disadvantages of having a brother interested in bats that one is expected to seek out such